

Sketch

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Belly-case

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Abstract

THE man in the bed beside me was going to die. The nurses knew there was nothing that could be done for him, and most of the patients knew it too. All day long he had lain there straining, and trying to breathe. Sweat rolled down his face and he caught his breath with a high, sucking sound...

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I looked at my watch; it was 2:30 a.m. Everyone else in the ward seemed asleep—all but the belly-case and me. Belly-case was a funny name to give a man, but it wasn't funny to get hit where he had been hit. A burst of machine-gun slugs had stitched a seam right across his belly and chest. No one in the ward could figure out why he still lived or even wanted to live, but he still continued breathing even though his face was the color of a dead fish's belly.

He had been here in the ward when they carried me out of Surgery two days ago. For two long days and two longer nights I'd lain here with one leg propped up on pillows, cursing the razor-edged flashes of pain that shot through my wounded leg, and listening to him gasp and fight for breath, smelling the sweet, cloying odor of fresh blood and the stench of rotting flesh, listening to him moan and plead for the water that he wasn't allowed to drink. A man with a slug in his guts isn't allowed water, the nurse had told us.

I reached to the small table beside my bed for a cigarette. I lit it, and watched the smoke trickle lazily upward in the shaft of moonlight that streamed through the window over my bed and illuminated part of the bed next to mine. My eyes were drawn to the arm hanging over the edge of that bed. The hand was grayish white and the fingernails were turning blue.

Funny about the belly-case, I mused to myself. Maybe he too had heard some speaker making an address to a crowd about the war. Pleading for men to enlist and fight for their country in its Sacred Cause. Maybe he too had fragments of such a speech floating through his mind. "Men dying gloriously on the Field of Honor . . . Giving their lives gladly in a Noble Cause!" Perhaps he too had stood there in the crowd with a lump in his throat, listening to that speech and believing every word of it.

"Please help me, please!" The soft half-uttered words snapped me out of my thoughts. I turned partly on my elbow and looked at the bed next to mine—the bed where the belly-case lay. His eyes were open, and he was looking at me. He spoke to me again. "Please give me a drink," he pleaded.

"You can't have any water," I whispered to him. "The nurse said so."

Once again that faint, far-away voice murmured in the gloom of night that surrounded us. . . "Just a drink of water, please!"

"I can't give you any water," I muttered, and my eyes looked away from his. "The nurse has told all of us that you aren't allowed to drink. With those wounds of yours, it wouldn't be good for you. You know that I can't break the rules like that."

There was no answer from the bed beside mine.

I looked back to the bed where the belly-case lay. He wasn't looking at me any more; he was staring at the table beside my bed. I looked down at the water bottle and glass that stood in the center of the table. "It won't do you any good to look at that water," I snapped. "I'm not going to give you any."

The belly-case didn't say a word, but his gaze left the water bottle and moved up to meet mine. His eyes lost that fixed, piercing stare and grew larger, softer, and pleading.

I couldn't look into those pools of pain and suffering any longer. Maybe the night nurse could help him. I struggled to sit up in bed and looked toward the glassed-in office at the front of the ward where the night nurse usually sat. The office was empty; she must have gone down to the galley after a cup of

coffee. Damn that nurse! When I really need her, she isn't here.

I looked over at that quiet bed beside me and met that terrible, quiet, pleading stare again. I leaned back against the back of my bed, but I couldn't bear looking into those eyes again. The ward was quiet except for the bubbling gasp of the belly-case's breathing. My hands seemed cold and dripping with sweat, but my lips were parched and clung together. I looked at the table where the water bottle shimmered in the moonlight.

"If he drinks any of that water, he'll surely die," I muttered to myself. And then it'll be my fault. I might as well take a gun and shoot the poor devil; it would be the same thing. No, I won't take the chance.

I started to slide back down into my bed, but a bubbling cough from the bed next to mine halted my actions. I looked once more at the belly-case. The look of pleading was still in his eyes, and a thin thread of blood was running out of the corner of his mouth. He tried to say something, but the words were drowned in his throat.

He's going to die anyway, I thought. He might as well die with the cool, wet taste of water in his mouth. I know that I would . . . and who would ever know that I gave him a drink? Besides, maybe it won't kill him and he'll be content for awhile.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I reached down and tilted the water bottle over the glass on the table. The clear water tinkled like drops of silver as it splashed into the glass and filled it. Somehow, I found myself on my feet between the beds. I picked the glass of water up off the table and held it to the lips of the belly-case. He drank, gulped, choked, and drank more slowly. The glass was soon empty. I put it down on the table.

My glance rested on the ash tray where my cigarette still smoldered. Slowly my hand moved down and picked the cigarette up. I stuck it between his lips. He puffed on it, once, then twice, and the glowing end of the cigarette winked cheerfully at me. I reached out and removed the stub of the cigarette from between his lips.

The belly-case seemed to smile, and his voice was clearer and stronger as he spoke. "Thanks, buddy. You knew what I wanted, didn't you?"

"Yes, I knew what you wanted," I said to him as I slowly moved back to my own bed. . . "I knew what you wanted."

I closed my eyes after I got into bed and I must have fallen

asleep, because when I opened my eyes again, the day nurse was changing the sheets on the bed next to mine. The bed was empty. I watched her, and a hard, little knot in my stomach grew larger and larger. "Where's the belly-case?" I asked her.

"He died during the night," she said. "We all expected it to happen, but there's something about his death that puzzles me."

"What do you mean there's something about his death that puzzles you?" I asked. My voice must have sounded odd, because the nurse looked at me rather strangely before she answered.

"Cases wounded as he was die rather painfully," she said. "When we found him this morning, there was a smile on his lips as if he had been happy about something."

Iowa Crisis

Howard Johnson



ED JENSEN pushed open the screen door and studied the clouds gathering in the west. His tanned forehead wrinkled as a troubled expression crept over his face. He had planned to start cutting oats, but ominous thunderheads, ripped by streaks of lightning, changed his mind. His attention shifted to the field across the road. The oats stood straight, then rolled in waves across the field as the dying wind breathed upon it. Ed started to smile with pride as he thought of what that field would yield, but a sharp flash of lightning and the lingering roll of thunder brought an expression of anxiety to his face. There had been hail storms near his farm recently. He had seen the stubs of cornstalks and the battered small grain, and smelled the stench of a year's crop crushed into silage by the fury of wind-blown hail. Now he wondered if his would be next.

"Ellen," he called to his wife as he turned toward the kitchen, allowing the screen door to slam shut. "Are you sure the chickens are all locked in?" He heard her shut the windows in the kitchen.

"Yes," she answered as she pulled down the last open window. "I coaxed them into the brooder house just before dinner."

Ed pushed the door open, chased back the flies with his straw